

GLORIFY GOD IN YOUR BODY

By Steve Zeisler

Most days when I venture forth from our house I cross Matadero Creek. This creek was formed naturally as water made its way from the mountains to the bay, but eventually the City of Palo Alto dug out the original channel and reinforced it with concrete so the water would flow more efficiently and safely. Every fall the channel fills up with silt, and over time plants grow thickly in it, so the city sends bulldozers into the creek to dig it out so that the channel is once again ready to transport rain water into the bay.

We recognize the power of water to do good. Human communities have always grown up around water sources such as rivers or springs. Water is a life-giving, and necessary part of the creation, but it is also capable of tremendous destruction. More than two dozen people have drowned in Tijuana in the last two weeks because of the flooding there. Once water leaves its channel it can be as deadly as it is life-giving when properly channeled.

Our sexuality is similar. It is life-affirming, and an essential part of who we are. It is the gift of God, and it is very good. Yet the river of our sexuality requires an appropriate channel. And just as the city cleans out the creek in the fall, we need to reaffirm what God's will is for our sexuality.

Let's read the passage that we touched on last week, in which sexual destructiveness is described in a profound way. Romans 1:24-27:

Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire towards one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

The early chapters of Romans are a relentless indictment of the rebellion of the human race against God. Chapter 1 proceeds from thanklessness and refusal to glorify God, to worship of human beings, to worship of that which is less than human, to increasing spiritual degradation. Their foolish hearts, Paul says, grow darker and darker; their lives are more given over to that which is terrible.

There are two ideas that Paul uses to illustrate the point. He speaks of minds that are depraved, which we considered last week. A depraved mind is filled with malice and arrogance and hatefulness and hurt. The other phrase that Paul uses to describe descent into wickedness is what he calls a dishonored body: sexuality that has rushed out of control and is serving to degrade both individuals and societies.

Note that in Romans 1:18-32, no matter what the subject (idolatry, sexual sin, social disintegration) things grow steadily worse. Choices are made at one point that result in circumstances that drag the individual or the society farther downhill, which proceed to other choices and more consequences; a spiraling downward in further and further degradation is characteristic of this chapter. There is no stopping point, no way to choose sin for oneself, and then hope for stability.

A point that is often obscured in English translation is that the words for men and women in verse 27 are actually not the more common terms Paul would use for an ordinary human man or human woman. These are

the words male and female. The people in view here are seen simply as physically male and physically female without the additional notion of personhood. They have been swept away in choices that were lustful and demeaning. It's an intentionally frightening description of what happens when God "gives over" rebels to the increasingly awful consequences of their choices.

Understanding the gift of sexuality

We will better understand these verses if we take time to lay a theological foundation. First, God created our sexuality as something very good and very powerful. We must affirm again what the good purpose of God was in creating our sexuality, to appreciate the protection of the channel through which this life-giving river is to flow.

Second, the world is in rebellion against God, and every one of us is going to have some twisted version of what sexuality ought to be. Nobody gets to start out as Adam and Even did in the Garden of Eden, naked and unashamed. Nobody gets to start out without some kind of insecurity or hurt attached to their sexuality. So our sexuality is very good to start with, but it is also twisted in our experience, and we need to know both of these things and take them seriously before we can conclude with a word of hope.

In Genesis 2 God comments for the first time that some element of his creation is "not good." It is "not good for man to be alone." When Adam was told to investigate and name the animals he learned for himself that nothing yet created could be his companion, agreeing with God that his aloneness was not good. God then acted to end Adam's aloneness by creating human sexuality.

In order to banish aloneness God might have created two asexual human beings to be companions, but he didn't. He chose to separate the sexes, to make them complementary to each other, to introduce all of the power and longing and energy that our sexuality adds to life. He created a woman for the man and gave each of them to the other.

There are important reasons for sex to be the powerful force that it is. First, although we all desire to overcome loneliness, long for love, and want to be understood; it is also true for almost everyone that there is a fear of intimacy that keeps us alone; things about us that we would just as soon nobody knew, control of our own destiny that we would like to retain. There is a great deal of inertia that will keep us from getting outside ourselves or letting someone else in. One of the things that the power of sexuality does is overcome that inertia, so that we find ourselves so overwhelmed with longing and hope-being captivated by someone-that we're willing to expose what's inside and let ourselves be known. That is one of the reasons our sexuality was made so strong. Second, a bond needs to be built between the man and the woman, a strong platform on which other things can be built. We'll talk further about that shortly.

Intended to bond a man and a woman

Now, what are the characteristics of the channel, the limitations that we find, through our study of Scripture, that God has put on our sexuality? I want to mention just four of them. First of all, the sexual relationship is to be between a man and a woman-not between a man and several women, a woman and several men, two men, or two women. From the beginning God intended that one man and one woman be joined and a one-flesh bond be formed between them.

Jesus spoke a wonderful commentary on Genesis 1 and 2 recorded in Mark 10:6-9. "From the beginning of creation, God made them male and female" (quoting Genesis 1). Then he went on, "For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and the two shall become one flesh [quoting Genesis 2]; consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh." And he added, "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." It is Jesus' testimony that monogamous, heterosexual union is the first boundary God put on expression of human sexuality.

Intended for Pleasure

A second limit that forms the channel of our sexuality is that it should be pleasurable. The Song of Solomon,

parts of Proverbs, and the descriptions of the experience of husbands and wives in the Bible reaffirm to us again and again that being lovers in marriage should be a positive experience that is affirming, tender, free and joyous. It isn't a duty that needs to be grudgingly entered into, or an activity that is in any way shameful. The intention of God is that our sexual experience give joy physically, and emotionally; this is another of the reasons sex was made powerful.

Intended to last a lifetime

Thirdly, this oneness is to last a lifetime. Now, most people have some experience with falling in love: Blindsided, with stars in your eyes, you were unable to think of anything else. He or she was the most attractive, wonderful person you had ever met (extraordinary features, lovely voice, marvelous wit, sensitive spirit - the list seemed endless). Of course, you didn't know your beloved very well yet; infatuation depends on a limited amount of information.

But the intention of God is not to repeat infatuation over and over again. And sadly, the experience of so many is to have a short-term relationship with all the jolt of infatuation, and then reality sets in and the relationship dies. They go from one infatuation to the next, but there is no time invested, no depth. Yet the feelings that cause so much delight are intended to lead us into a relationship in which we can discover a real person; learn to minister to their aches and fears and needs; discover their beauty and depth and wisdom; and allow them to minister to us in the same way. The infatuation should begin something that takes a lifetime to accomplish.

In the book of Malachi, the prophet is bringing an indictment against the people, and he calls God as a witness: "The LORD has been a witness between you [the men of Israel] and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant." The men of Malachi's day, like many in our day, were abandoning the wives with whom they had raised children and were attaching themselves to young, unbelieving women who were sexually more attractive.

Malachi is indicting them for this choice. But the phrase he uses that fascinates me is "the wife of your youth." He doesn't say "your youthful wife." Wives don't stay youthful any more than husbands do. God brings couples together and you began growing old together when you were young. And you have learned to be lovers, to share ideas, perhaps to raise children together, to solve problems together, and to nurse one another through illness. Neither of you is as physically attractive as you once were, but you have learned to see beauty in one another in the process of growing old together. You still find reasons to be drawn to each other. The wife of your youth is the one who stays your wife for a lifetime. God intended our sexuality to be not just the jolt of infatuation, but a power that helps us uncover intimacy at every point in the long journey of life together.

Intended to create new life

The fourth characteristic of the channel through which God intends our sexuality to flow is that becoming parents is related to being lovers. It's not just a coincidence that you get children by making love. God chose sexuality to create new life. A husband and wife see their shared influence on the children---the child growing up looks a bit like each of them and acts a bit like each of them---that each has contributed. Parenting reinforces the bond between the two of them because they are drawn out of themselves; they're not just in love face-to-face but shoulder-to-shoulder as they sacrifice self-interest for the sake of their children. And they will love each other more as a result. That's part of what God intended for our sexuality as well. (Not every married couple can have children, and of course there are other ways to add children to a marriage; I don't mean to diminish that. But in the majority of circumstances being lovers will lead to being parents, and that is God's design.)

To banish aloneness (which is 'not good') God created marriage, and the husband and wife experience all the blessing of being with a companion. But that is not the only way in which loneliness is banished; there is much more. Children, who are the product of a healthy marriage are likely to have a strong sense of their own worthiness and to anticipate eagerly their own marriage and family. Additionally, growing up with brothers and sisters in a healthy home allows for the creation of relational skills and family members offer each other support for a lifetime.

Children growing up in a home that is stable and secure usually become healthy people capable of loyalty and friendship and communication. And the community becomes healthier and healthier. There is more blessing, more loyalty, more friendship, more courage, more willingness to give, to others. God created sex to bring about marriage leading to children who are emotionally healthy, who in their turn marry and have children. God's way of banishing aloneness starting with Adam and Eve, was for sexuality to lead to bonding in marriage to give life to everyone who followed them. So our sexuality becomes a way of defeating loneliness not just for the pair who become husband and wife, but for everyone else who is given life by the life they experience. It's a very good thing!

Experiencing what God intended to be good

Now, none of us got to experience what God set in place in a perfect world. The other sad, unfortunate reality that the Bible teaches is that we are born with a spiritual disease, and everyone got some broken version of what God intended. The Bible is sometimes read as if it were a rule book. But it is not; the Bible is a book of redemption. Ultimately it is a book that takes seriously the fact that the world is a mess, that families are not always healthy or even close, that there are sexual twistings that happen to people. And this is a book of how the Redeemer is going to care for people who didn't get to experience the life they wished for.

Everybody was born into a family that was inadequate. Nobody was parented completely well by their parents. Everyone has some kind of sexual desire or inclination or fantasy (at least occasionally) that they are ashamed of. Some of the loneliest people I know are married (although marriage is supposed to banish loneliness) because they are married to someone who has no social skills, or someone who is horribly angry, or someone who is cold and distant.

Some experience their sexuality so that it inclines them not toward a loving marriage but toward other entanglements—strong homosexual desires, for instance. Or perhaps sexuality is tangled up with humiliation and violence; they were violated as a child, and they can't think sexually now without adding bondage and pain. There are people who are captivated by fetishes and peculiar ways of dressing and all sorts of other things; their sexuality gets crowded in with all these things, and instead of its leading them to make a happy marriage, it keeps leading them into some dark place.

We come now to a very important point in our consideration. Having some notion of what could be, if we look clearly at ourselves we say, "That doesn't describe me." We must choose, having recognized that we aren't what we ought to be, to go to our Lord and say, "Help me, Creator and Redeemer! I have a history that I sorrow over and would love to have forgiven and remade. Take the broken version of me. You said it is not good to be alone. You help me; give me life from you, relationships that are honorable. Give me a righteous way of overcoming loneliness."

If not, we will do what it says in verse 25, exchange the truth of God for a lie: "Here is what I am, and I will live out what I discover in myself. I will call what I know is not good, good. I will use the brokenness of my family, which has made me hard and cruel and dominating, to find somebody whom I can dominate and hurt and treat cruelly. I will use the sexual inclinations that make me desire unrighteous experience and become their champion. Instead of affirming God's truth, I will choose something else." That is exactly the whole process of Romans 1. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie. Claiming to be wise, they become fools.

Our sexuality is something God wants to be good, and in order for that to be the case, it must flow down the channel we have described. But God does not make our choices for us. People who are bored or sad may choose a sexual liaison for temporary relief, although none of their boredom or sadness goes away. Sex can be an anesthetic for a time, but that's not what it was intended for. There are some who will use their sexuality to exhibit themselves and demand the attention of others, as if that would somehow deal with loneliness. But exhibitionism is not what our sexuality is for, (rock star Madonna to the contrary). It doesn't exist so we can manipulate, hurt, abuse, dominate, threaten, and confuse people for our benefit; although some people function that way. It's not to be used to create celebrities or sell cars or any such thing.

Hollywood movies and related industries bathe our culture in visions of deviant and heartless sexual

experiences and make them seem ever more normal. What once was abnormal has long since become normal, and even what used to be very abnormal has now become normal, and what is unthinkable abnormal is very close to being accepted in the circle.

But if we bring our brokenness to the Lord and ask him to redeem it, what will he do to give us life? Well, we don't know specifically what he will do for individuals, because he is creative. He is not just generally the Savior of everybody, but he is your Savior and your companion and your Lord who hears your prayers. One of things I know he does is change people who never believed they could have a heterosexual marriage because they have same sex desires or other compulsions. As a "new creation" some are made capable of loving a marriage partner and are given fine marriages. The Lord may make such changes, but he may not. There's no guarantee that everyone will be happily married; that's not a promise of Scripture.

What else might he do? He might place you in a surrogate family helping raise their children, deeply loved by all the members of that family, treated as a healthy member of the home, joyfully entering into all that's there. That may become his answer for you. There are ways in which he can change our outside circumstances just as he can change our insides. We know he forgives our past; he erases, forgets, and never will remember again the things that haunt us. He can teach us to forgive ourselves. And if we choose to let him, the Savior we have invited into our lives will do something for us to banish aloneness and teach us to love him and to grow in faith.

A Christian's perspective on homosexuality

Now I want to say a bit more about the particular issue of homosexuality because of the language of Romans 1:24-27. It is clear in this passage and others that God intends sexual expression to take place between a man and a woman. Weak "bible scholarship" which glories in secular social science will try to say that this passage (and others) teach, "Homosexual lust is sin, but homosexual love is different, and homosexuals can make a marriage in exactly the same way that heterosexuals can, complete with monogamy, a lifetime commitment, and so on; that's an option." There is nothing in Scripture that supports that possibility, and it seems to me remarkable that God would have expected the church (not to mention Old Testament believers) to live for two thousand years, growing to maturity in Christ without knowing such a possibility existed.

But having said that, we must also say that neither is homosexuality ever off by itself being railed at by a prophet or an apostle or the Lord or anybody else in the Bible. It is always in a list of many other things. It's one of the expressions of our sin nature, but it is not a unique one. God created sexuality for a purpose. He is not going to deviate from that, but he is going to minister to individuals beginning where they are. As Christians we need to recognize that one of the reasons for the rage that is growing among homosexual activists is precisely that this particular sexual sin has been isolated.

Imagine that you or I had discovered at age eleven or twelve that what everybody else around us was saying about girls or boys and what they were beginning to experience we knew nothing of, and the minute we made any allusion to our questions, we were ridiculed. Imagine that you or I were made to feel queer and isolated and grew to adulthood feeling those things. Then a deadly disease began taking the lives of a friend at a horrendous rate; so as the years go by one after another of our friends died, and the greater heterosexual world as far as we could tell didn't care very much; these were only gay men who are dying. Rejection, ridicule, physical threats (gay-bashing) and isolation have created an angry community.

Homosexual acts are sins and scripture consistently lists them as such, but they are not singled out as particularly heinous. There is one remedy for all sin. In Christ we are forgiven and made new. As we grow in faith, our lives display righteousness. The Lord may change the desires of the homosexual person so he or she can enter into heterosexual marriage, or he may not. He may meet their needs for companionship and friends and loyal brothers and sisters some other way. But sins of this type do not confound him. No special loathing is required. Nor is the power of God inadequate to establish righteousness in the experience of those with backgrounds of homosexual sins. There are more heterosexuals than homosexuals who will not marry. The word of God is applicable to everyone-sexual expression belongs only in marriage and God's grace is greater than our sin.

Two of the most wonderful stories in the Old Testament of companions or friends, loyal people to make it through life with, are about two men in one case and two women in the other. Remember the story of David and Jonathan. It says their hearts were knit together, and when Jonathan died, David said:

"I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother;
you were very dear to me.
Your love for me was wonderful,
more wonderful than that of
women." (2 Samuel 1:26.)

These were not homosexual men; if anyone in the Bible was heterosexual, it was David. But what he was saying was that he had a brother who meant everything to him. If you're not given a marriage, maybe you'll be given a brother, someone who will stand loyally with you through everything you have to go through. Maybe that is the way God will meet your needs.

The other story is that of Naomi and Ruth. Again, these were heterosexual women, both of them married at different points in the story. Yet when both were widowed, Ruth said to Naomi, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried." (Ruth 1:16-17.) Naomi had a companion to go through life with her, someone who cared for her, ministered to her, and provided for her for the rest of her life (even after Ruth married again).

Recall the words of 1 Corinthians 6:19-20: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body." Instead of allowing our bodies to descend into more and more dishonor, more and more degradation, we are to glorify God in our bodies. The presence of God's spirit means that life can be different from whatever it has been. A great price has been paid to offer us the privilege of glorifying God with our bodies.

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